Janette Turner Hospital
1942-

(Also has written under pseudonym Alex Juniper) Australian novelist and short story writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Hospital's career through 1997. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC,* Volume 42.

INTRODUCTION

Australian native Hospital is recognized for the sumptuous, complex, highly descriptive language of her fiction. Hospital, who considers herself an "unintentional nomad," has lived in Australia, Canada, the United States, Great Britain, France, and India—all places that have left indelible marks on her psyche and on her writing. Her favorite characters are those who live on the fringes of society, such as prostitutes, drug dealers, and street people of all descriptions. Best known for her novels *Borderline* (1985) and *The Last Magician* (1992) and her short story collection *Isobars* (1990), Hospital's work lends eloquent voice to the effects of displacement on humanity and vividly describes conflicts between culture and gender.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born in Melbourne, Australia, Hospital moved with her family to Brisbane when she was seven. Her parents, Adrian and Elsie Turner, were deeply religious people who belonged to an evangelical, fundamentalist sect of the Pentecostal faith and who read the King James Bible nightly around the dinner table. The world outside their home, however, was working-class Australia, which was typically anti-authoritarian and anti-religious. Consequently, from the beginning of her life, Hospital found herself negotiating diverse cultures and feeling like an outsider—themes that would later come to dominate her writing. Hospital received a B.A. from the University of Queensland in 1966. While at college, she taught high school English in Brisbane from 1963 to 1966. In 1965 she married Clifford G. Hospital, a scholar of comparative religion and a specialist in Sanskrit. She and her husband left Australia, and from 1967 through 1971, she worked at Harvard University as a librarian. In 1973 Hospital received an M.A. from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. A scholar of medieval literature, much of her writing includes allusions to authors such as Dante Alighieri. Hospital went on to teach English at both St. Lawrence College and Queen's University from 1973 to 1982. She accepted appointments as writer-in-residence at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology during 1985, 1986, 1987, and 1989; the University of Ottawa in 1987; the University of Sydney and La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, in 1989; Boston University in 1991; and the University of East Anglia, England, in 1996. Hospital returned to La Trobe University as an adjunct professor of English from 1990 to 1993. She also lived in India while her husband was on sabbatical in 1977. This experience inspired her first novel, *The Ivory Swing* (1982), which received the Seal First Novel Award from Seal Books. She was awarded the Atlantic First Citation in 1978 from *Atlantic Monthly,* and received another Citation from the magazine in 1982 for her short story, "Waiting." Hospital's first collection of short stories, *Dislocations* (1986), received the CDC Literary Prize and, in 1988, the Fellowship of Australian Writers Award. In 1989 her novel *Charade* (1988) was awarded the Torgi Award from the Canadian Association for the Blind and the Australian National Book Council Award. *The Last Magician,* was considered for the prestigious Booker Prize in 1992. Hospital has also written a mystery novel, *A Very Proper Death* (1990), under the pseudonym Alex Juniper. Hospital remains an international itinerant, living in Australia, North America, and Europe during different parts of the year.

MAJOR WORKS

Before Hospital was a novelist, she was an honored short story writer, and she continues to work in this genre. The stories in her first collection, *Dislocations,* explore the fragmentary elements of contemporary life and show characters of many nationalities responding to upheaval as an opportunity for growth. The final story in the collection, "After Long Absence," shows the protagonist trying to return to her family despite her resentment for having been raised a Jehovah's Witness, for which she was ostracized by other children. In the end, she is unable to compromise and learns that she is truly homeless, even in the midst of her parents and siblings. In Hospital's second collection, *Isobars,* the characters exist in a limbo between past and present and are often haunted by ghosts. In "A Little Night Music," a male passenger on an airline flight continually apologizes to his nervous female seatmate, who had barely missed a previous flight that was destroyed by an explosion. After the plane lands, she sees the man's picture in a newspaper and discovers that he was the ghost of the terrorist who bombed the ill-fated flight and perished with all aboard. "The Last of the Hapsburgs," another piece featuring a ghostly presence, focuses on the theme of dislocation. The title characters are the surviving members of a Jewish family that persevered through the Holocaust. They are endlessly jeered in the parochial area of Queensland

where they live. On Friday nights, they gather and listen to the violin played by the ghost of their eldest son, who perished in a concentration camp. Hospital's first novel, *The Ivory Swing*, grew from her experiences living in India with her husband. Through observing the marginalized position of a widowed woman in a wealthy Indian household, Hospital examines several cultural paradoxes and the effects they have on all the characters involved. In *The Tiger in the Pit* (1983), Hospital presents a family drama around the arrangement of an anniversary celebration. (The title is taken from a T. S. Eliot poem and also alludes to the novel's cantankerous patriarch.) The story is told through different points of view that juxtapose the perceptions of the family members and their tangled personal histories. *Borderline*, the novel that established Hospital as a major writer, again explores one of her recurring themes—dislocation. While waiting to cross the border between the United States and Canada, Felicity and her companion discover an illegal immigrant from El Salvador. On impulse, they rescue the immigrant from the freezer van where she is hidden and take her to a remote cottage in Quebec. The remainder of the book focuses on the woman's subsequent disappearance and her would-be rescuers' attempts to repair the harm they caused. *Borderline* functions not only as a thriller, but also as an examination of both personal and political boundaries.

Charade, Hospital's next novel, attempts to link the world's cultures and the wonders of the physical world to a human search for origins. The plot weaves together allusions to Scherherazade's *One Thousand and One Nights*, Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and the Australian search for roots and identity; all in the context of the protagonist's year-long affair with a physicist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and her search for the father she never knew. *The Last Magician* is a novel of alternative realities, replete with medieval symbolism. The novel is set primarily in Australia, and is peopled with outsiders living on the fringes of society. Hospital follows the lives of four childhood friends who, partly as the result of a terrifying shared secret, have evolved into adults that deal with the past in vastly different ways. Set in a fictive Sydney, the novel exposes this shared secret and the impact it has on her characters' lives. Hospital uses these revelations to comment on the contrast between rich and poor in first-world countries and human beings' perceptions of reality. *Oyster* (1996), her latest novel, is set in the remotest part of the Australian Outback, a place called Outer Maroo. Far from the stereotype of wilderness tales with noble pioneers bringing civilization to the savages, *Oyster* is filled with questionable characters and acts of violence. In the novel, Outer Maroo consciously cuts itself off from all communication outside its borders in an attempt to erase the world's memory of it. Everyone in the town has been implicated in the mistreatment of slave laborers who once mined precious opals. The entire population of Outer Maroo continues to benefit financially from the ill-gotten profits and they now have a vested interest in keeping the truth a secret.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Hospital's work has been praised for its lush language that, despite its complexity, manages to maintain an airy quality. Many critics consider her to be an expatriate Australian writer (a label that Hospital disdains) who is at her best when her work is set in Australia. However, some reviews note that American readers may find Hospital's work somewhat challenging due to its profusion of unfamiliar Australian place names. Additionally, her novels, most notably *The Last Magician,* have been criticized for being difficult reads and for attempting to cover too much material, whether through plot, theme, or characterization. Hospital is esteemed by many reviewers as a "prose stylist," whose fertile imagination and imagery reveal a serious author unafraid to take chances with profound themes. Still, there are critics who argue that Hospital's work is often hampered by an overuse of literary allusions, ambiguous conclusions, and difficult plot lines that tend to limit her audience.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

The Ivory Swing (novel) 1982
The Tiger in the Tiger Pit (novel) 1983
Borderline (novel) 1985
Dislocations (short stories) 1986
Charades (novel) 1988
Isobars (short stories) 1990
A Very Proper Death [as Alex Juniper] (novel) 1990
The Last Magician (novel) 1992
Collected Stories: 1970-1995 (short stories) 1995
Oyster (novel) 1996

CRITICISM

John Bemrose (review date 6 March 1989)

SOURCE: "Just Being Alive," in *Macleans,* March 6, 1989, p. 62.

[*In the following review, Bemrose concludes that* Charades *is "an uneven achievement." While praising Hospital's vivid writing and incorporation of science themes, Bemrose finds shortcomings in the novel's evasive cleverness.*]

Oscar Wilde's words—"Truth is rarely pure and never simple"—could stand as an epigraph for Janette Turner Hospital's fourth novel, ***Charades,*** a book that is as much mind-tease as story, as much about what did not happen as what did. Hospital has seemed on the verge of writing